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THE EVOLVING INTERMEDIATE UNIT.

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THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPT OF THE INTERMEDIATE ADMINISTRATIVE SCHOOL UNIT IS THAT OF THE COUNTY SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS OPERATING AS AN ARM OF THE STATE, WITH REGULATORY POWERS AND RECORD KEEPING DUTIES AS WELL AS EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS. THE NEW TYPE OF UNIT THAT IS EVOLVING IS LARGELY SERVICE ORIENTED (I.E., SPECIAL EDUCATION, DATA PROCESSING, CURRICULUM SPECIALISTS, ETC.), AND USUALLY IT COVERS A MULTI-COUNTY AREA. WHEN DETERMINING THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THESE UNITS, IT MUST BE REMEMBERED THAT ALL LEVELS OF A 3-ECHELON STATE SCHOOL SYSTEM MAINTAIN A DELICATE BALANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS, AND EACH LEVEL REFLECTS CHANGES MADE IN ANY OTHER LEVEL. THE LEGISLATURE DELEGATES SPECIFIC FUNCTIONS TO THE VARIOUS LEVELS OF STATE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE. IT SHOULD BE REMEMBERED THAT LOCAL CONTROL OF EDUCATION IS IN EFFECT ONLY AS THE STATE LEGISLATURE CHOOSES TO MAKE IT, AND THAT NO IN-LINE STAFF HIERARCHY EXISTS BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT LEVELS. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE CONFERENCE ON SCHOOL DISTRICT REORGANIZATION AND THE INTERMEDIATE SERVICE UNIT (HARRISBURG, PA., APRIL 21-22, 1966). (DK)

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THE EVOLVING INTERMEDIATE UNIT

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Intermediate units, the middle members of a three-echelon state system of educational organization, are not a new invention. In its traditional form it has existed for nearly one hundred fifty years. The office of county superintendent of schools actually antedates establishment of the first local district superintendency. This type of intermediate organization began as "an arm of the state" with regulatory and record keeping as well as educational leadership functions. It was created in a day when public education was limited to elementary education and when most schools were of the one-teacher variety.

Extensive expansion of educational programs and school district reorganization and school consolidation have made the intermediate type county superintendent of schools obsolete. There are many counties which are a single school district, many others with only two or three districts. Similar circumstances are common wherever the reorganization of local school districts has made substantial progress. And while there are some states in which the traditional intermediate agency still persists, hardly defensible and making little real contribution to education, it definitely is being phased out. The structure no longer exists in Delaware and Idaho and it is rapidly going out of the picture in Missouri, Colorado, Arkansas and Texas. While many uncomplimentary things are often said about the functionaries in these positions, it should be emphasized that the fault is not with the people but with the system. With a weak structure, an election system of securing officials, low level qualifications,

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low salaries, and an absence of funds, staff, or opportunity to perform functions of consequence, we can hardly expect more.

The main purpose here with the phasing out of the traditional county superintendency is to focus on the new type of intermediate unit that is evolving. There is now nearly fifteen years experience with this new type operation and its promise is almost without limit. Progress in intermediate unit development has also been substantial, especially in the past four or five years.

One of the chief characteristics of the evolving intermediate unit is that it is largely service oriented. While most states have delegated some administrative and regulatory functions to this agency, by far its most important contributions are the provision of programs in special education (including clinical and diagnostic services) and vocational education, operating instructional materials centers and data processing centers, providing curriculum specialists for the conduct of in-service education programs, coordinating cooperative efforts in research, purchasing, Federal projects, and many other activities which require a relatively large population base for the development of an effective and economical program. The intermediate unit as a service agency is becoming the means by which local school systems can have access to programs which they cannot provide for themselves. On an area or regional basis through an intermediate unit these highly specialized programs are possible in a practical way.

The second major characteristic of the evolving intermediate unit is that it is a multi-county area. In those states where county boundaries have been disregarded in the formation of this new type agency, the area tends to be the equivalent of a multi-county area. About the only instances where the intermediate unit territory is likely to be less are densely populated metropolitan areas.

Organizational Structure

While there is a temptation to discuss the wide range of service programs intermediate units are now providing in various parts of the country, the focus here is on structure, the organizational framework, and the relationships which might or should exist between intermediate units and both the state education agency and local school districts.

Perhaps the most important concept regarding the structure appropriate for the type of intermediate unit now evolving is that it cannot be considered apart from the structure of local districts and the state agency. To discuss the intermediate unit in isolation is a trap. Its characteristics and functions must necessarily be viewed in relation to a total state system of schools. Consideration must be larger than any single segment of the organization regardless of whether the analysis is of the local school district, the state department of education or the intermediate unit. We must begin thinking, and with more clarity than we have in the past, in a state system way.

It is recognized that there is a certain body of literature, however limited, that consists largely of recommendations for the appropriate organization of intermediate units. And we could go down the line with suggestions as to how good, effective intermediate units should be organized:

- The intermediate unit should be a local education agency; it should have a constituency. This concept of the intermediate unit rejects the notion that these agencies should be branch offices of the state department of education.
- The intermediate unit should have a board of education. This should be an elected board, and there are a number of sound ways by which this board might be elected.
- The intermediate unit board of education should have the responsibility for the appointment of the intermediate unit superintendent and for setting his salary.

- The intermediate unit board should be empowered to employ the staff needed to carry on the functions it undertakes.
- The intermediate unit board, superintendent, and staff should develop service programs, coordinate educational efforts, and provide leadership appropriate for the particular circumstances of the area.
- The educational responsibility of the intermediate unit should not be narrowly prescribed but should encompass the entire spectrum of education. Its responsibilities should be as comprehensive as those carried both by local school districts and the state education department--a comprehensive responsibility vested in a single, stable administrative unit operating on an area or regional basis.
- The intermediate unit should have adequate and dependable sources of financial support.
- State efforts to equalize financial ability should apply to intermediate units just as they do to local school districts.
- In no instance should state funds in support of intermediate unit functions be a deduction from funds which would otherwise be distributed to local school districts.
- Every intermediate unit board of education should have access to some funds, even if only a small amount, that only that board can determine how and for what purposes they will be used.

A number of additions could be made to this brief list of suggestions and recommendations. And there is nothing wrong with them. They are administratively sound. But the approach of looking at only one level of administrative organization at a time--one segment of structure in a state system of schools--without including all organizational levels in the same look is no longer the way to go. This is largely what we have done in the past. This unfortunately is what a number of states and groups within states are now doing. A three-echelon state system of schools is

a delicate balance of relationships. When we tinker substantially with any segment of it, the other levels are affected.

Even worse, the tendency to look at only one level at a time has a tendency to put blinders on people. The chief advocates for reorganizing intermediate units into a new and stronger type organization, for example, are those working in an intermediate unit structure. At the same time, the tendency of those working in local school districts is to confine their efforts entirely to matters of concern at the local district level. Many local district administrators have no concern and no interest in what has happened or what might or could happen to intermediate units. At times, administrative groups within a state even block the efforts of each other in securing necessary improvements. Some take the view that it would be unwise to work toward the improvement of the existing intermediate units until after the job of reorganizing local school districts is completed, a process that may never be completely finished.

The point of this discussion is that not enough people are thinking in a state system way. When weakness exists at any level--local, intermediate, or state--the state system is weakened. Organizational levels are mutually re-enforcing. What each does is dependent in part upon what each of the others do. None can be considered in isolation--without taking fully into account the structure and functioning of the other levels.

Now there may be some value in being a little more specific about the "state system of schools" concept. Education as a state responsibility cannot be questioned. And every state has accepted the responsibility. But when we recognize education as a state responsibility, our reference is to the state legislature and the state constitution. "State" with respect to responsibility does not mean the state department of education. In every state, the legislature has elected to exercise its responsibility and implement educational programs through the creation of and delegation of functions to specialized units of government:

- a state education department
- a substantial number of local school districts (in all states except Hawaii)
- in some but not all states, a series of intermediate units.

States have decentralized their responsibilities for providing education by a legislative delegation of specific functions to these various levels or organizational structure. While there is a great deal of support for decentralized responsibility and administration in governmental theory, two significant concepts should be understood:

1. Control of education is in no way an inherent right of local self-government except as a state's legislature chooses to make it so.
2. A line-and-staff type of relationship between organizational levels does not exist. The state department of education is not "over" intermediate units and local school districts except in terms of legislative delegation. In the same way intermediate units are not "over" local school districts. Ideally, each level of organization has delegated to it those functions it is best able and equipped to carry out. Each level has a high degree of autonomy to perform its functions. None is subordinate to the others. But <u>all</u> organizational levels <u>are under state school law</u>.

<u>People and Relationships</u>

Up to this point, the discussion here has been primarily on organizational structure. But you can go only so far with structure. It takes people to make structure work. The best structural framework from the standpoint of organizational theory can fall on its face unless people with an appropriate concept of its operation are working in it. There are numerous instances of local school districts and intermediate units similarly organized and operating in comparable circumstances--having almost an equal chance to "do good" and sharing equally handicaps, shortcomings, and stumbling blocks--where both a great deal and very little is going on. Some

would identify the difference as the presence or absence of "leadership." Perhaps that's it. The point is that it's the people and not the structure.

The delicate balance of mutual re-enforcement and support between the organizational levels of a state system of schools, however well they are built into the structure, must be maintained by people. A few briefly described illustrations may be helpful in emphasizing this matter of relationships.

Illustration One:

Intermediate unit services should not be a substitute for adequate local school districts. In terms of structure, the objective should always be to make every level of a state system strong. There is always the potential danger when a wide variety of intermediate unit services are available for weak local districts to seek these services to fill the voids which their own inadequacy cannot cover. When this happens, there tends to be a continuation of local school districts which would otherwise die a natural death. And sometimes intermediate units cater to such districts. They are always looking for customers. They feel that the more participants they have, the better their service program looks. If it does, it is only on the surface. Intermediate units should never be a substitute for or deter needed local district reorganization. If they do, they threaten, actually weaken, the state system.

Illustration Two:

Intermediate unit programs and services must be of high quality. When intermediate unit personnel work in local school districts, they can be effective only if they have something to offer. This means that the intermediate unit staff must be better qualified and more experienced than their counterparts at local district level. Unless they are, they will not be accepted graciously by local teachers, principals, school boards or parents. It may be possible for a local district to hide incompetent staff members but this cannot be done by an intermediate unit. The entire service program, what it is and what it

might become, can be seriously injured by just one bad experience. This means that when an intermediate unit is contemplating undertaking a particular service program, they should seek only top quality personnel. The structure must permit paying what it takes to get the best. This suggests that in any instance where an intermediate unit cannot find or cannot afford top quality staff, the best course to follow would be to defer undertaking the particular program until the position to do so is stronger. One or two high quality programs at the intermediate unit level are worth more than a dozen mediocre programs. The matter of relationships is so important that the most appropriate rule to follow is that "no service is better than poor service."

Illustration Three:

In this country we believe in the principle of obtaining the "consent of the governed," that people should participate in the development of programs that affect them. This kind of involvement is equally applicable to intermediate unit-local district relationships.

The structure for intermediate units and the manner in which it operates should provide some guarantees for local school district autonomy:

- Each local school district should have freedom to decide whether or not it will participate in any intermediate unit service program.
- Each local school district should have an opportunity to participate in and assist with the planning of the specific service programs its intermediate unit undertakes.
- Each local school district, through its chief administrator and board of education, should have opportunity to participate in the development of policies and procedures which guide intermediate unit service programs. Final policy determination, however, must be reserved for the intermediate unit board.
- When intermediate unit personnel work in local districts, their

activities and operations should be within the framework of local school district policy and generally under the supervision of local district administration.

When such relationships are characteristic of intermediate unit operations, there is virtually no possibility of any infringement of the autonomy or prerogatives of local school districts.

Evaluation of Structure and Functions

At least brief attention should be given here to one additional reality. We cannot any longer expect things to be static, unchanging. In fact, just the opposite is true. This means that the structure of a state system of schools will probably always need to be in some sort of flux. It must be responsive both to the changing demands of education and to the changing composition and characteristics of each local area. At the very minimum, this implies the need for:

- A periodic evaluation of the total state system of schools.
- A periodic consideration of the allocation of functions among local, intermediate and state levels to determine if some re-allocation is desirable.
- A periodic analysis of any existing structural weaknesses with a bolstering of structure in any instance where weakness can be identified.

Only by such systematic study and follow-up of action can a state system of schools avoid obsolescence, inadequacy, and weakness.

A new type of intermediate unit is evolving. It is developing out of successful experience with local school district reorganization and recognition that many educational service functions require a population base for operation and a degree of specialization in staff which are beyond the reach or opportunity for effective use of what local districts either are likely to or should become. Substantial legislative reorganization toward the new type of intermediate unit has already been enacted in Michigan, Iowa, Washington, Oregon, Wisconsin, Nebraska and Colorado. A much needed overhaul of the intermediate unit structure is now pending in New York. Studies currently in progress

in Pennsylvania, Ohio and California indicate a great deal of promise for significant legislative action. In certain other states there is recognition of the need to do something but the formal steps required for actual accomplishment are yet to be taken.

More important than just the development of organizational machinery are the outstanding service programs which such action has encouraged into being. Within the next year or two as a result of recent state legislative actions, the number of such programs and their geographic distribution will be multiplied many times. Positive forces are in full swing in many places. And some of the most creative educational leadership anywhere in the country is now being attracted to intermediate unit administration. It's hard to stand in the way of success. The evolution of a new type of intermediate unit is well on its way.